

# Summarizing Success

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*By Alexandra Durning*

"How can I write in my own words? My words are not good words!" My student eventually erupted in frustration with this cry from the heart. The rest of the class joined in with similar complaints.

Many of us blithely tell our students to "Summarize what the writer has written in your own words." This is a daunting task for anyone, let alone a student whose first language is not English. First, it calls for great confidence in one's own ability to understand the ideas contained in a piece of writing. Moreover, in some cultures the written word is very powerful. Many language learners come from backgrounds where there is great respect for anything in print. Often the idea of challenging or changing anything printed in a book is unacceptable. Then there is the natural shyness felt by the student of English about changing a well-written piece of text. They may feel that it is a waste of effort to produce writing that is, in their eyes, second best.

These problems, although difficult, can be overcome in two ways. First, students can break down the task of summarizing into small steps that can be mastered one by one. Then teachers build up the students' confidence by practice and encouragement to the point where they feel confident enough to tackle a task by themselves.

## Words or Concepts?

Many students think that writing in their own words simply means changing a few of the words of the original writer. For example, I gave my students a technical text to summarize which included the following sentence:

The reading on the temperature gauge leapt up to 30oC.

As part of his summary one student wrote:

The reading on the temperature gauge jumped up to 30oC.

This only proved that the student understood that "leapt" and "jumped" were synonyms, not that he understood the point of the text. The ability to assimilate concepts from a text is important because understanding is vital if students are to succeed in their studies. Summarizing skills can provide a method of reducing massive reading loads to manageable proportions. They can also help students to improve their general language skills.

Good summarizing skills:

- develop confidence in handling language
- extend vocabulary
- improve grammar



- practice note-taking skills
- improve reading and comprehension skills
- give practice in writing
- allow the student to appreciate that language can be manipulated
- encourage understanding of ideas contained in texts rather than concentrating on words alone

Like most useful skills, summarizing must be learnt and practiced. However, once the student has developed the skill, it will repay the time invested in learning it many times over.

## Doing It

I have used the following method successfully with many different groups of students.

The students should be encouraged to read the passage straight through once. At the end of the first reading, ask the students to write down a sentence explaining what the passage is about. This starts them thinking about meaning.

Then get them to read it again, paragraph by paragraph, taking notes in their own words or the words of the text of the main point or points of each paragraph.

If the students are fairly confident at this stage that they understand what the text is about, they can go straight on from here. If the students are still unsure, get them to read through the text again, checking their notes as they go along.

Now comes the part that initially causes yells of outrage from the students. I tell them to put the text out of sight. I sometimes have sharp disagreements with my students before I can persuade them to do this. I may have to demonstrate that the method works by using the above steps to summarize a couple of paragraphs from a text chosen by my students. Then I ask them to use their notes and their memory to write a short account of what they have read.

By removing the crutch of the original text, students use their understanding of ideas, rather than their memories of words when they write. Then they write naturally in their own words.

Obviously some words and phrases must come from the text, but the setting and the construction are the student's own. If students get completely stuck, allow them to look at the text, but encourage them to put it away before they start to write again.

At the end of the exercise you should have more confident, more receptive, and hence more successful students.

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